License and Limitation of Republican and Loyalist Wall Paintings in Northern Ireland

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Introduction and Historical Background

The conflict in Northern Ireland, colloquially known as the Troubles, has led to a robust mural tradition in the major cities. Mural content is dictated by many different factors, including the status of the movements behind the creation of the paintings. Although ostensibly appearing to be a parallel phenomenon with similar distribution, symbol choices and medium, the thematic differences of the murals produced seem to indicate actual disparities in socio-political support enjoyed by each oppositional group. The mural imagery is truly dynamic when viewed over the length of the Troubles, with theme and symbol selection appearing to correlate directly with the social and political status of the painters in the community at large. In the pages that follow, I will examine how this support dictates content choices for the murals in Northern Ireland, specifically, in Belfast. Since those currently involved in mural creation are mainly paramilitary organizations affiliated with the two larger oppositional groups, the focus of my examination will be on their recent creations. I am also limiting my discussion to thematic evolution of murals in Belfast alone, a choice I will explain in greater detail below. While there are murals in Derry and other smaller towns around Northern Ireland, I will only reference areas outside of Belfast for their utility as examples.

To review Northern Ireland's fraught history, a preface of terms is necessary. The major opposition groups in Northern Ireland are broadly unionist and nationalist. Unionist ideology is centered on a desire to retain ties with Britain for the political, economic and cultural benefit of its citizens (Rolston 1991: 113). Unionists are mostly Protestants who self-identify as British or Northern Irish, although those designations are not absolute (ARK 2010). Nationalists, in the case of Northern Ireland, refer to Irish nationalists, a predominantly Catholic group. Irish nationalists desire Irish rule over the entire island, despite the unionist minority that would be created in the north (O'Kelly 2004: 514). Loyalists and republicans are the two 'radical' subgroups of unionism and nationalism, respectively. Loyalism is based in allegiance to the British monarchy as a surrogate for British cultural ethnicity (Rolston 1991: 30). Unionists are also deferent to the royal family, though they are much more aligned

with British government and politics. Loyalists have a strained relationship with Westminster, largely attributed to repeated British intervention in the affairs of Northern Ireland. The republican movement is generally seen as the paramilitary and activist branch of nationalism in Northern Ireland. Republicanism is inextricable with the creation of the modern Irish state, the Republic of Ireland, and its defenders, the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

Although the problems visible in Northern Ireland today are truly the result of centuries of conflict between Britain and Ireland, the decline into the Troubles is mostly concentrated within the 20th century. The early 1900s witnessed the rise of public dissent over England's long-standing colonization of the island of Ireland. In 1916, a planned uprising took place in Dublin with smaller-scale skirmishes across Ireland. Public motivation, stirred up by the newly created Sinn Féin party, drew from fervor established by the Celtic revival. This artistic and cultural movement encouraged the Irish to feel membership of an ancient lineage worth protecting, whose rhetoric of homogeneity in the face of British other-ness made finally ousting the colonial power a necessity (O'Kelly 2044: 508, 510). The ensuing revolt, now known as the Easter Rising, did not engage much outright public support until British leadership ordered the execution of the organizers. Following this execution, the popularity of republicanism skyrocketed, earning Sinn Féin more than 80% of the Irish parliamentary seats in Westminster during the 1918 elections (Rolston 2000: 159).

In the few tumultuous, warring years that followed, the IRA was central in the reinstatement of Irish independence in the country. The only major stumbling block involved what to do with the largely British-sympathetic northern corner of the island. Partition was an option, although it greatly angered those nationalists who had so recently been involved in liberation of the whole island. Eventually, partition became the only viable solution – especially in light of an active threat of violence from northern unionists if forced to integrate into the new republic (Sluka 2009: 282). Thus, the little island was divided

into two new countries; the Republic of Ireland in the south and, from six of the nine counties comprising the Irish province of Ulster[1] in the north, Northern Ireland was created (Moore and Sanders 2002: 10).

Northern Ireland began its new existence with a so-called 'golden age' of unionism. Partition carefully carved out a state that encompassed the vast majority of the northern unionist community, who heavily supported the new, devolved government installed in Belfast immediately following partition. Pockets of Irish nationalists eventually brought trouble to the unionist leadership, although not directly. British intervention became an increasingly common phenomenon in the management of the fledging nation due to oppressive legislation targeting the mostly Catholic nationalists for inequality in housing, employment, education and other civil rights. With their less-than-confident attitude towards unionist capability, Britain paved the way for a loyalist insurgence. The central goal of loyalism quickly became defense against and containment of the unwanted nationalist minority, since compromise with them was an unacceptable option (Rolston 1991: 29).

The Troubles comprise the era from the late 1960s to the late 1990s, although it is arguable that the conflict has not entirely ceased. In the 1960s, Ireland was experiencing a civil rights movement inspired by similar events taking place in the United States. In Northern Ireland, the complaints issued from nationalist Catholics led to demonstrations that were attacked by the RUC[2] and the British army. In January of 1972, one such protest march led to Bloody Sunday, the murder of 14 people by the British army in Derry's Bogside neighborhood (Rolston 2000: 162). As tensions increased, the British government stepped in to alleviate the problem by granting nearly all of the civil rights requests, something that certainly would not have happened under continued unionist leadership. In a final blow to unionist confidence, the British government reclaimed total political control in Northern Ireland in 1972 (Rolston 1991: 29, 54).

[1] Ireland is divided into four ancient provinces that predate English settlement on the island: Leinster, Munster, Ulster and Connacht

[2] Royal Ulster Constabulary; police force in Northern Ireland that was historically anti-nationalist (Rolston 2004: 41)

The next decade led into some of the most dynamic years of the Troubles in terms of paramilitary activity and general unrest. Internment[3], a process put in place by the British government to discourage republican activism, restricted the rights of prisoners who had been detained on political grounds (Buckley and Kenney 1995: 81). In 1981, republican paramilitary prisoners staged a hunger strike from within the walls of Long Kesh penitentiary outside Belfast. Civilians in Northern Ireland rallied for the protestors, while Margaret Thatcher quite literally left them for dead ("British Officials and Politicians": *1981 Hunger Strikes*). The first hunger striker to die was named Bobby Sands, and his death, like his Easter Rising predecessors, reinvigorated support within the nationalist community. Over 120,000 people participated in his funeral march, to show respect for Sands and the broader struggle he represented (Rolston 1991: 83). The death of nine more hunger strikers secured the coalition of support for the increasingly active republican movement.

In a similarly unifying manner, the Anglo-Irish Agreement ushered in a wave of empowered loyalism that sought to replace the old, ineffectual unionist leadership (Rolston 1991: 40). This legislation passed in 1985 was a treaty signed by the Irish and British heads of state to chiefly declare two things; the status of Northern Ireland was conditional upon a consent agreement of its population and that a devolved, power-sharing assembly would be instituted in Northern Ireland between unionist and nationalist politicians (CAIN 2012). These provisions were anathema to the loyalists and much of the unionist public, who saw it as a major concession towards compromise with Irish sympathizers. Support for loyalist activity and general ideology – aversion towards the British government, Catholicism and Irish nationalism – was heartily supplied by conservative unionists, whose convictions excluded any possibility of cooperation with the Irish (Shirlow 2001: 746).

The Troubles is a unique example of sectarian conflict for a variety of different reasons. It has the central elements of a sectarian (as opposed to racial) conflict in that there are reasonably well-defined

[3] Imprisonment without trial for anyone suspected of activity with a proscribed organization (Buckley and Kenney 1995: 81)

oppositional groups involved with mutually exclusive social or cultural histories (Forker and McCormick 2009: 26). In Northern Ireland, the groups involved cite ethnic dissimilarity as their reason for dispute over territorial holdings. The extent to which this is an organic distinction versus a result of reinforced ethno-nationalist thinking is debatable. Murals showing patterns of history revision to conveniently support the agenda of each group are directly in line with political historian Cillian McGrattan's belief that emphasis on ethno-nationalist differences spawns "anachronistic treatment of the historical record" (McGrattan 2010: 182). Legitimacy is the ultimate prize for both republicans and loyalists, and it will dictate who eventually 'wins' Northern Ireland. Disparate levels of attention are paid on either side to constructing a history that legitimizes claim to the territory, with overzealousness being casually equated to insecurity of the movement as a whole. Northern Ireland as a territory is peculiar in that it does not house the capital of either state effectively vying for it. The source of the conflict is internal to Northern Ireland itself and is not being dictated by either Dublin or London. However, the two peripheral governments have structured the course of the conflict through intervention and facilitation of diplomatic agreements when necessary. This 'traditional' external influence has occasionally exacerbated the tension, especially in the case of treaty-making and installation of military forces, like the British army (Buckley and Kenney 1995: 1, 3).

The Troubles is not a 'typical' sectarian conflict because of its location. Very broadly, territorial disputes and ethnic wars are perceived to be the domain of new, developing or underdeveloped countries. In one way, Northern Ireland matches that expectation due to its age relative to other European nations. Yet, aside from its youth, the other similarities normally associated with ethno-sectarian conflicts are not true of Northern Ireland. Specifically, Northern Ireland is an industrialized nation in an area whose development is generally considered to be on the 'western' scale. Although it would be foolish to feign ignorance of other ethnic and minority groups in 'westernized' nations that have been denied their indigenous territory, armed struggles are generally viewed as barbaric (read: underdeveloped, tribalistic) ways of settling disputes.

Thus, Northern Ireland is a particularly interesting, dichotomous case study for examining several degrees of social and political relations. There is the broad problem of warring ethnic factions, each buttressed by highly nuanced rhetorical claims to the territory they inhabit. Their conflict presents a comfortably western lens for studying relationships between any variety of oppositional groups at interfaces; in the main cities of Northern Ireland, nationalist and unionist or republican and loyalist areas are sometimes divided by nothing more than a road. In other areas, the close proximity is so inflammatory that tall cement 'peace' walls with boundary gates have been erected and are judiciously opened or closed depending on the current level of unrest. Lastly, Northern Ireland is a unique stage for studying the breakdown of colonial relationships with colony citizens, in the case of unionist relations with Great Britain. Luckily, these complex political problems are well-documented in many ways and therefore traceable. In the case of the murals, the possibility of being able to track these changes is as simple as reading the writing on the wall.

Murals and Other Visual Displays in Northern Ireland

The mural tradition in Northern Ireland can be viewed as part of a broader spectrum of visual performances and displays in the country (Cashman 2008: 361). Among the diversity of visual media, connections are commonly made between the murals and shrines erected to victims of the conflict, despite the decidedly politicized slant of murals and the familial, personal nature of shrines (Santino 2001: 96). The murals are also viewed as a product of the long-standing parade tradition in Northern Ireland (Hartnett 2003: 135). For as long as the Loyal Orange Order[4] has existed, parades have occurred to celebrate the 12th of July, the apocryphal date of Protestant William of Orange's conquering his Catholic father-in-law for the rule of Ireland. These grandiose celebrations maintain notoriety for their ostentatiousness; historically, marchers have made a point to go through the city center and walk down streets inhabited predominantly by Catholics (Rolston 2003: 4). The centerpieces of these parades are the bands involved and, in particular, one instrument: the lambeg drum. To many Catholics, the lambeg drum

[4] Unionist fraternal organization named for its deference to William of Orange (Buckley and Kenney 1995: 176)

is a potent symbol of aggressive unionism due to its hulking size and sound (Buckley and Kenney 1995: 205). The 'marching season' has long been an annual highlight for many unionists, and a great deal of money is poured into creating festivity. Parade extravagance, however, has experienced the same decline as overall unionist visual presence since the rise of loyalist activity in the mid-1980s. (Rolston 1991: 40)

Shrines are a more minor component of the display landscape in modern Northern Ireland. The process of their creation, unlike parading and, until recently, unlike the mural tradition, is largely a bipartisan event. Both republicans and loyalists openly mourn their deceased by erecting semi-permanent monuments. These shrines are composed of images of the departed, along with flowers and personal objects, usually at the location of the person's death. It has been postulated that this practice of marking the physical place of death instead of a final resting place carries over from the largely Irish tradition of ghost belief; while this is likely an influence to the republican mourners, it does not explain the prevalence of the practice amongst loyalists in Northern Ireland (Santino 2004: 80).

Parades have been, and continue to be, the centerpiece of the 'marching season,' although additional celebratory elements like bonfires, fanciful, decorated wooden arches and murals have been included over time to heighten community involvement. The first murals were conceived as decorative extensions of the arches – an attempt at continuity of image and message throughout the neighborhood. Eventually, the Orangemen began to paint murals as standalone parts of the celebration and the medium acquired its own separate category of display altogether (Davies 2001: 155). As the singular phenomenon they are today, murals have an interesting rhetorical power over the public which parades lack. Murals are essentially permanent visual messages, despite the constant potential for vandalism or deterioration. These wall paintings, which occasionally cover the entire gable end of a house or apartment building, have staying power; they are meant to be visualized as a component of the architecture (McCormick and Jarman 2005: 69). Murals can serve as a medium for message distribution in the community, as part of an effort to keep everyone on the same page and also enhance the visibility of their respective movements.

Republicans today take advantage of this opportunity, due to their historical inability to self-advertise under unionist rule (Davies 2001: 159).

Today, the murals on a given street quickly reveal territorial ownership to anyone passing by. It is important to note that murals are not usually present at the interface between two segregated neighborhoods, but are located well within the confines of those boundaries (Jarman 2012). Since the first murals were created as part of the community decoration for unionist holidays, it is understandable why later solitary pieces would also be located within territorial boundaries (Loftus 1983: 13). Though it would be tempting to assume that paramilitary murals are an exception to this rule, as part of an attempt to intimidate inhabitants of the enemy territory, the opposite is true; murals are largely painted by the communities they are intended for (Rolston 2012). As such, they sustain a visual rhetoric for the people who see them on a daily basis, supporting the thoughts of the wider community, nationalist or unionist, and carefully guiding them towards understanding of a broader political agenda.

When I spoke with Neil Jarman[5], however, he explained that modern murals are capable of evoking a diverse range of feelings in the community residents. To some, he said, murals have only the rhetorical strength of a billboard, where those most likely to 'buy into' the product are likely already brand-loyal to one ideology or another. Others will pass by unaffected and unconcerned with what is being advertised, as if the murals featured food or domestic products. This thinking eliminates the possibility of mural content being entirely controlled by socio-political support: if a cross-section of the public cares about the murals only as much as they would a billboard, then support for mural creation is less likely cyclical and more likely linear. This is to say that public or political response to the actual images being painted is not the main support for the creation of new murals, but instead a non-reactionary, inherent desire by the community to continue participation in the mural conversation drives production forward. Of course, if the wall paintings did not resonate at all with the community or lacked

[5] Director of the Institute for Conflict Research in Belfast; author of *Material Conflicts: Parades and Visual Displays in Northern Ireland*

then necessary level of public support to fuel their creation, the muralists would be at a loss for motivation to create; a problem the loyalists have solved with commissions.

Mural painting began exclusively within the Protestant unionist community. This is a definitive fact, traceable to the appearance of a "King Billy" mural in 1908 that was painted by a shipyard worker named John McLean. Previously, King William of Orange had only made annual appearances in banners during the parade season surrounding July 12th, but later unionists of all skill levels tried their hand in representing their national hero (Rolston 2000: 159). The quintessential King Billy mural (Figure 1) depicts the monarch crossing the River Boyne on a white horse – a symbolic entrance into his new kingdom of Ireland. Unionists were thereafter fairly prolific in painting murals, especially those that

Figure 1: "King Billy" in Hopewell Crescent, Belfast

featured symbols of the Orange tradition. With the immense popularity that the unionist government had during the young years of Northern Ireland, painting Orange murals became very nearly a state activity (Davies 2001: 156).

The beginning of bipartisan mural painting did not fully come to fruition until the early 1980s. Both loyalists and republicans experienced veritable explosions in mural creation in response to specific political events that occurred within the decade. Each group found themselves relatively helpless to ameliorate their situations, so mural painting served as a reactionary mechanism. Prior to the 1980s, unionist officials had been actively prohibiting republican access to any media outlet, for fear that the radical message of the IRA and Sinn Féin would get out. The true advent of the republican mural began in 1981, during the republican hunger strike in Long Kesh. Civilians took it upon themselves to encourage support for the strikers by painting murals to "match their [prisoners] determination and commitment" (Conway 2009: 165).

Only a mere five years later did loyalist murals begin to proliferate. It is critically important to note that up until the civil rights struggle in Northern Ireland, the government was ideologically unionist. Loyalist paramilitaries already existed, including the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Defense Association (UDA)[6], but British intervention and the Anglo-Irish Agreement renewed activity. The Agreement constituted a compromise which the minority loyalists took as a pointed threat to the autonomy of their nation. What followed was a highly militant and violent campaign, both on the ground and on the walls.

In modern day, the murals of Northern Ireland are located mostly in the major cities. Belfast is certainly the 'hotbed' of mural production, due largely to the fact that over half of the northern Irish population lives in the Belfast metropolitan area (*Population Statistics*: 2010). There are other reasons for Belfast's prominent position in mural creation; the political centers of all the major parties and

[6] The UVF dates itself to 1916, an organization that grew out of the 36th Ulster Division which was decimated during the WWI Battle of the Somme; UDA rose to prominence during the late 1970s as a coalition of anti-republican defense groups (Rolston 2003: 13)

paramilitaries are located in the city along with Stormont, the original assembly building for the devolved unionist government. The second largest city in Northern Ireland, Londonderry (Derry), is also well-known for its murals. It is certainly a source of collective sectarian memory in its own right, but I will be excluding it from my paper in terms of socio-political analysis.

Why exclude Derry? The majority of my reason for avoiding discussion of Derry is due to a mural-painting collective known as the Bogside Artists. They are named for a neighborhood in north central Derry that has historically been home to Catholics. Although a small area, it has experienced minimal dilution over the years in terms of ethnie[7]; to this day, the majority of Bogside residents are Catholics and republicans (Cashman 2008: 363). Recently, the Bogside Artists have taken on the unique project of transforming the main artery through the Bogside, Rossville Road, into a "People's Gallery" of murals. Their murals exclusively focus on the civil rights struggle in Northern Ireland and remembrance of Bloody Sunday – which took place meters from some of their current works. Although striking and well-kept, the Bogside Artists have monopolized republican mural painting in that area. Their images of a single time period, frozen indefinitely, give little input into socio-political evolution in the city. Additionally, the Bogside Artists are also fairly reticent to let any of their murals change (Rolston 2012). Not only have they singled out a time period to represent, but their goal to create a static art gallery has distorted the organic life cycle of the murals, making them incomparable with those in Belfast. Although this makes it difficult to analyze the murals for similar patterns of content in correlation with socio-political support, there is certainly something to be said for a collective whose main goal is to celebrate the sacrifice of the republican community.

An additional limitation to analysis of murals in Derry, and actually some in Belfast, is the commodification of these paintings. In speaking with scholars and laypeople, I found that one common theme in public perception of the murals is their suitability to tourism. Television crews have been

[7] 'A named human population with a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one of more elements of common culture, a link with a homeland and a sense of solidarity among at least some of its members' (Forker and McCormick 2009: 26)

exploiting the murals' presence for news coverage since their proliferation in the mid-1980s (Forker and McCormick 2009: 425). Northern Ireland has attracted morose attention due to the violence of the Troubles and the murals provide a relatively innocuous touchstone for the surrounding intensity. It is curious to wonder what sort of effect this international exposure has had on the conflict itself, and whether one side has been given a biased portrayal through the repeated use of their murals as a backdrop. If that is the case, then both external and internal status are determining what kinds of mural content are ultimately produced.

Republican Murals

The republican movement has enjoyed a great deal of support since its inception in the early 20th century as a result of its expansive, multi-faceted nature. Its large original base of support has helped to shape the breadth of the mural content available to republican painters today. One of the most obvious themes nearly exclusive to republican murals is the incorporation of international struggles (Rolston 2004: 42). Although the murals limit explicit commentary on the severity of the foreign problems depicted and avoid directly comparing them to the conflict in Northern Ireland, they nevertheless advertise solidarity with those being repressed. A myriad of topics have been addressed, from Native American rights in the United States (using Leonard Peltier as an example), to the Basque population in the Pyrenees region, to the most famous, the occupation of Palestinian territory by Israel (Figure 2). As a symbol of solidarity and a stand-in marker of paramilitary territory, republicans have flown the Palestinian flag in areas where they operate heavily. In response, the loyalist community flies Israeli flags and occasionally sports Star of David necklaces (Loftus 2012).

The international themes are important to analyze in terms of artistic license, because they indicate that painters are quite trusted in their respective neighborhoods. Of all possible mural theme options, the various international struggles are the least directly representative of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. There are a few possible explanations for why the presence of international murals is so great on

the republican side. First, their capacity to generalize ‘struggle’ comforts members of the community with ambiguity, allowing them to identify with the most basic components of the conflict dictated in the mural without requiring awareness of the details (Bryan 2012). The murals’ muddied relevance to the Northern Irish conflict, distorted by equating two entirely separate situations, demonstrates the diversity of the republican support base. There has been very little resistance to these instances of foreign imagery, indicating community resonance with the images and tacit license to the painters to continue, ‘as they were’. Incorporating external thematic elements also makes the republican stance in the conflict seem more secure, since using the plight of foreign peoples as surrogates for the Troubles avoids reinforcement of ethnocentric competitiveness (Forker and McCormick 2009: 436).

Figure 2: Palestinian prisoners' mural on Falls Road, Belfast

Solidarity with the feeling of oppression evoked in internationally-themed murals is only half of the reason why this imagery is almost exclusively a republican phenomenon. The other logical half of this

disparity is the loyalist inability to invoke these images. Advertising the position of the occupier, as opposed to the occupied, has never been a profitable stance for gaining sympathy or support. Interestingly, there is one international connection the loyalists have attempted to make on more than one occasion: the diaspora of their citizenry. In particular, they have boasted shared heritage with prominent American historical and political figures, such as Davy Crockett, United States' Presidents Washington, Buchanan and Jackson (Figure 3) and a scant few others as representatives of the 'Ulster-Scots' culture spreading across the globe (Jarman 2012). While technically true that those exemplary people do have

Figure 3: President Andrew Jackson surrounded by Scottish, American and Ulster provincial flags - off Shankill Road, Belfast

ancestral connections to the same land and ethnic background that the loyalists currently defend, the Ulster-Scots phenomenon never had enough community or political backing to make it a relevant movement. At the local level, it was an acceptable choice for an international connection since it avoided overt mention to the unionist position of majority power, a characteristic that would likely be extremely inflammatory in Northern Ireland. From a foreign perspective, referencing Ulster-Scots heritage is neutral

enough to prevent any direct disapproval from Irish sympathizers, especially Americans. A certain level of flattery is necessary when targeting the United States due to its status as the largest repository of Irish immigrants, hence the references to American figures (O'Kelly 2004: 516). As a mural theme, the Ulster-Scots identity faded nearly as quickly as it appeared on the scene, its weakness owing to a single historical thread trying to be manifest as a full identity (Bryan 2012).

Another very common theme in republican murals is historical and mythological imagery. For Northern Ireland, where republican and nationalist citizens live mostly in isolated islands, I believe that referencing Irish history and mythology is primarily a strategy to maintain a connection with Ireland for these otherwise disconnected populations. These murals serve a different function than the other more openly political ones; instead of being agents of documentation for the change in political climate, they display the hopes of the community at large. Historical and mythological murals represent a focused desire to return to an Ireland reunited, free from British influence of any kind (Rolston 2003: 9, 14). Their power within a republican community works by invoking the collective memory of a purportedly homogenous people; details like Celtic knot work and Irish language inscriptions have the transformative effect of making the urban landscape appear 'Irish', however effectively decorative that may be.

On a deeper level, referencing historical and mythological events has great strength in legitimizing the republican position within the conflict and by proxy, their claim to Northern Ireland (Buckley and Kenney 1995: 45). First and foremost, it gives their struggle a lifespan; the Troubles are not just a passing annoyance or a downturn in political relations that one might expect with cyclical power-shifting of political parties. They are an enduring problem, one whose staying power is indicative of strong ideological support on both sides. Historical and mythological imagery in murals creates an analogy between the current events and those several hundred or thousand years ago. It is this conflation effect that makes painting brawny Fenians or other mythic characters desirable; their presence lends a legendary quality to the current struggle purely by association (Rolston 2004: 42). Thus, symbols like Cú Chulainn or St. Patrick earn high levels of cultural value and become desirable targets for trans-sectarian

poaching (Forker and McCormick 2009: 433). Cú Chulainn, though traditionally thought of as an Irish nationalist character, has been adopted by the UDA as "a defender of Ulster" within the broader narrative of the Cruthin mythos (Moore and Sanders 2002: 12). The Cruthin details the influx of Pictish tribes into Ireland, who were overthrown following the arrival of Celtic warriors from mainland Europe. It revises the origin stories of Irish inhabitance on the island to re-cast them as invaders, with loyalist predecessors being the true indigenous group (Buckley and Kenney 1995: 49). Although based in some amount of fact, the Cruthin has been disregarded by a large portion of the loyalist public, not to mention the republicans (Rolston 1991: 36).

Whether it came across as an attempt to reach 'too far back', crossing the fine line between ideological self-defense and digging into the ancient past for evidence to predate your enemy, or whether it was simply viewed as historical fiction produced in desperation for a colony population, the Cruthin is only readily supported today by the UDA (Forker and McCormick 2009: 434). The marginal support for the Cruthin myth is exemplary of the internal argumentation that prevents loyalism from having a cohesive base of social support. Its inclusion of Cú Chulainn also begs investigation into the security of loyalist-British association. Borrowing symbols from the history of Ireland rather than Britain seems like a gesture that might indicate strained relations between loyalists and the British (Moore and Sanders 2002: 12). Cultural borrowing might also represent a completely opposite scenario, where loyalists are confidently digging in their heels, so to speak, and forcing the Irish to defend their ownership of history in addition to the land. Other examples of this historical contention include the figure of St. Patrick (Figure 5), who has been claimed as both an Irish and British saint and both a Catholic and Protestant individual. The motto, crest and emblems of the Celtic-Irish O'Neill family (Figure 6) have also been co-opted by the loyalist side, likely due to their historical density in Ulster and principal insignia[8] already being used in the provincial flag (Davies 2001: 434).

[8] "The Red Hand": a symbol of an apocryphal story wherein Niall of the Nine Hostages (ancestor of the O'Neill clan) cut off his left hand during a sea race to claim Irish land

Figure 4: Cú Chulainn as a 'defender of Ulster' in Hopewell Crescent, Belfast

Common historical elements that appear in republican murals today are symbols of the Easter Rising, the Famine, and the hunger strikers who perished in 1981 (following the 30th anniversary of it in 2011). The Famine (Figure 7) is an especially potent symbol of British oppression; emaciated figures are painted among barren fields and the rocky, coastal countryside of the west of Ireland, whose population was most affected. The Easter Rising has a whole cache of imagery to draw from, including the leaders involved, early IRA symbols and the Irish tricolor flag (Rolston 2004: 42). Phoenixes have been painted (Figure 8) as a symbol of the rising and a reminder of the continued capacity the island has for rebirth as an Irish nation. The increased use of these and other cultural/political symbols has been concomitant to the disappearance of Catholic-stylized mural content. Though Famine imagery could still be construed as Christian, the focus on Jesus-like "suffering in the cause of Irish freedom" that marked the early republican murals has waned over time (Forker and McCormick 2009: 428). The suffering motif imbued religiosity into the murals, transforming the republican activists from rebels to martyrs and appealing to a

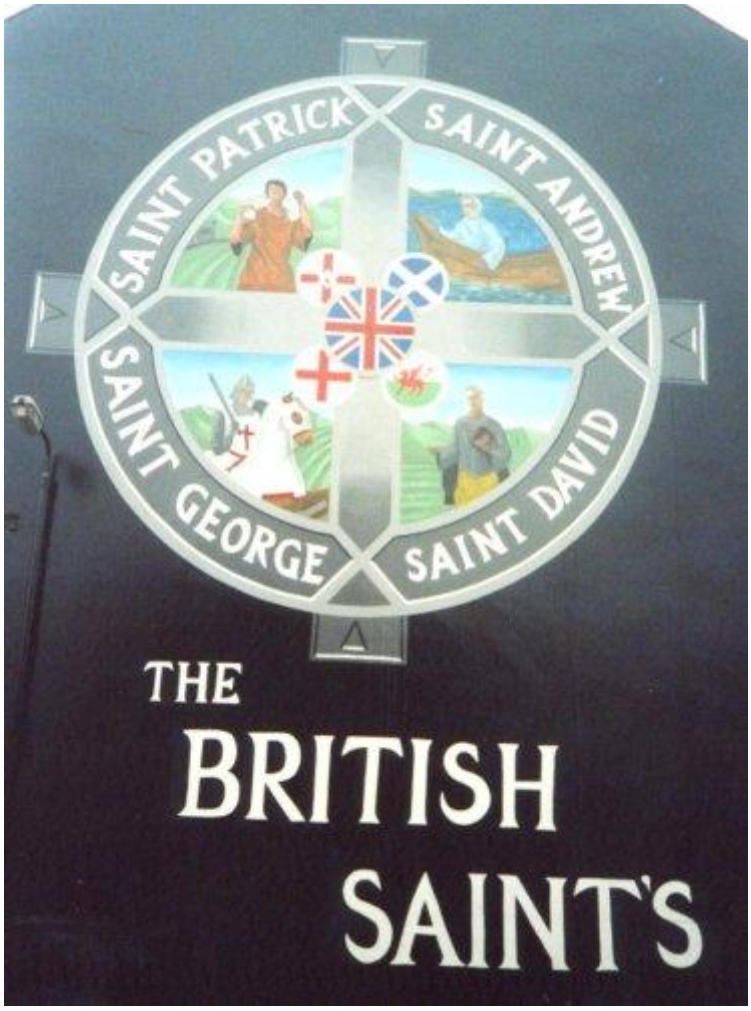

Figure 5: St. Patrick re-appropriated by British Protestants

Credit: Dr. Jonathan McCormick (CAIN)

much wider base of nationalists (Rolston 1991: 69-70). As this kind of imagery has been replaced with other mural themes, it is plausible to argue that 'softening' the republican image for the purposes of gaining support is no longer necessity (Jarman 2012).

One theme in current murals that is widely shared between both loyalist and republican mural painters: local pride. Local imagery is not a novel element in the longer scope of mural creation, but it is telling of the current social and political climate in Northern Ireland. Broadly, the proliferation of these murals is largely attributable to the peace process and the ceasefires declared in the 1990s. Overt political declarations of movement away from violence necessitated a relaxation in the sorts of messages and

images being painted on the walls. Republicans had painted their fair share of paramilitary murals supporting the fight against Britain, but quickly made public their intentions to stop producing violent murals after the IRA declared a ceasefire in 1994 (Rolston 2003: 5). As a result, the loyalists faced a serious dilemma: begin the movement 'backward' toward the originally more peaceful, purely unionist murals, or continue painting the Armalite[9]-riddled creations they had been so well known for. With the ceasefire removing any threat of republican violence, the loyalists lost their rationale for enduring paramilitary activity and thus had no reason to continue painting it (Rolston 2003: 8). Thus the emergence of local pride murals. These kinds of paintings could still play into the loyalist hand of referencing their established communities while avoiding the problem of appearing to condone the continuation of violence. Pride in local matters would also appeal to the widest base of loyalists and unionists, so the risk of alienating those aligned ideologically but not militantly would be minimized.

Painting murals of local subject matter allowed loyalists to adjust their image towards peacefulness while still retaining a connection with the community. However, by moving away from intimidating imagery, loyalist leadership opened itself up to appearing receptive to republican 'demands' and therefore weak. The republican ceasefire singlehandedly undercut the entire reason for existence of the loyalist groups – organizations largely based around their participation in paramilitary activity. Whereas the republican murals grew out of a more diversified, socio-political movement, truly loyalist murals have been the side-product of paramilitary activism from the beginning (Rolston 2003: 8). Shifting towards production of more neutral, local imagery thus proved difficult for the loyalists, so the trend of painting paramilitary murals continued even after the ceasefire. Community actions, including state-funded re-imaging campaigns, put pressure on the loyalist muralists to 'clean up their act' or risk seeming unable to retire one of their major claims to fame (Bryan 2012). It is unsurprising that they were fixated on the idea; after all, aside from their distinction in loyalty to the crown and not the British government, they have little else to separate them from unionism. Loyalists have claimed that the

[9] Arms manufacturing company known particularly for producing the AR-15 and M-16 rifles, standard military weapons

Figure 6: Red Hand Commandos mural on Shankill Road, Belfast

Features 'red hand' of O'Neill family crest and "lamh dearg abu", modified form of O'Neill family motto "lamh dearg Éirinn abu", "the red hand of Ireland to victory" (Mathews and Bigger 1907: 325)

Figure 7: Famine mural on New Lodge Road, Belfast

Figure 8: Phoenix mural of IRA on New Lodge Road, Belfast

continued production of these murals was not a case of inability to move forward, but rather a desire to perpetuate a threatening image to loyalist (and unionist) politicians. For those who left the paramilitaries and made their way into political careers, these violent murals were a reminder of their compatriots' capabilities and a firm warning against undermining the activities of the loyalist groups (Rolston 2004: 40).

The intention behind creating these new murals in loyalist areas was to provide community reassurance more so than self-advertisement, and yet there was still a good degree of public backlash for loyalist inability to actually soften their image. To outsiders, especially republicans, the appearance of new murals featuring masked gunmen was just more of what they had come to expect from loyalist painters. In the loyalist community, public reinforcement of their ideology as a one-note organization gave the group a bad reputation. From speaking to civilians on this subject, there seems to be a contingent of loyalists who have fully distanced themselves from association with the paramilitaries and their

leadership. Their cited reason? Association with the kind of bravado that would cause a visible public failure to conform to progression towards peace is association with a foolhardy group of people.

Although avoiding the idea of stepping down from militarism entirely, the loyalists (and republicans, to an extent) did participate in large-scale initiatives to re-image their communities, which in turn produced many of the local pride murals visible today. There was no shortage of local pride in the past, but positive re-imaging meant looking for reasonably neutral topics, scenes etc. to portray on the walls like a local hero, sports team or landmark. I am excluding memorial murals from the category of 'local pride' due to the non-neutrality of their presence in the landscape. Memorial murals have political charge, owing to the difference between the intent behind their creation and public interpretation. Although the intention of the painters might have been to remember a local person, paying them tribute through a visual form of celebrity, the polysemy inherent to a memorial mural creates plenty of opportunity for political interpretation (Santino 2004: 368). Naming a victim publicly brings the conflict into sharp focus anew, which works against peace negotiations. While remembrance is undoubtedly necessary to move forward as a community, turning the spotlight directly towards violent events could easily inflame opponents by riling up the victimized group and reminding the murderers that they have been successful in the past.

In terms of pride in local figures, Belfast is well-known for having adopted its most famous footballer son, George Best, as an icon of their city – even the city airport is named for him! However, he has also made appearances on loyalist murals due to his neutral quality as a symbol (Rolston 2004: 41) (Figure 9). Other local pride murals directly reference the locality of the painting, examples being the New Lodge Road murals in north Belfast that depict the conditions of the street over the years (Figure 10). Another popular theme is depiction of a local band (Figure 11), which are common on both sides. On the Shankill Road, a pre-fabricated mural[10] with pictures of local boxers (Figure 12) is on prominent

[10] Pre-fabricated murals in Belfast and Derry are usually either painted on boards and then nailed to a wall or printed and 'laminated' under a pane of plastic for protection

display facing the street. Boxing is a popular sport in the British Isles, and although not entirely innocuous (boxing being a sport rather reminiscent of actual fighting), it is a good example of the kind of local mural loyalists have turned to.

Figure 9: George Best on Blythe Street, Belfast

Sandy Row in Belfast is a unique example of the duality of sentiments that loyalist murals present today. The top of the road is marked by one of the more iconic murals in Belfast (Figure 13), infamous for its intimidating content and proximity to the city center (most murals exist in outlying neighborhoods around the city). The mural depicts a lone gunman, masked and fatigued, alongside a huge caption that reads, "You are now entering loyalist Sandy Row heartland of south Belfast Ulster-freedom fighters." While awkwardly lacking in punctuation, the psychological power of this message is not deficient; passage down that road involves entering someone's territory (Holding 1999: 7). However, just a block away are two adjoining murals, one that displays Irish Football Association players running down a field with joyful, sporting looks on their faces (Figure 14) and another with a cartoonish map of Northern Ireland, detached from the rest of the island (Figure 15). These dichotomous images are indicative of the contradictory ideals that the loyalist organizations are trying to reconcile, attempting to appear both

Figure 10: "New Lodge Road in 2000"

Figure 11: Local band mural on New Lodge Road, Belfast

Figure 12: Pre-fabricated mural off of Shankill Road, Belfast

Figure 13: Loyalist mural at the entrance to Sandy Row, Belfast

Figure 14: Irish Football Association mural on Sandy Row, Belfast

Figure 15: Northern Ireland pride mural adjacent to Figure 14 - Sandy Row, Belfast

progressive and defensive simultaneously. And yet, even in an effort to present neutrality, local pride murals on this stretch of Sandy Row are not without an assertive element to them – directly above the image of the footballers is a caption that reads "Our Wee Country." This small bit of text and the detached map of Northern Ireland combine to give an autonomist undercurrent to the otherwise innocent murals.

The Sandy Row murals are rife for analysis in terms of social and political support for their loyalist movement. Aside from the three murals that I have already mentioned, there are others down the short road that is Sandy Row: memorial murals to fallen paramilitary members and heraldic murals with symbols and rankings for the local UDA leadership (Figure 16). Near the head of the road, farther south than the 'sentry' mural[11] and the two Northern Ireland pride murals, is one half-destroyed paramilitary mural on a dilapidated wall (Figure 17). Neil Jarman has written about the life cycle of murals and the meanings behind the different possibilities for mural "deaths." In the case of this mural, its destruction was likely a result of the message being rendered obsolete; a single, masked, anonymous gunman is an artifact from a bygone era of heightened paramilitary loyalism (McCormick and Jarman 2009: 51). On this very small section of road, there are three entirely different gradations of loyalist mural content. The presence of the sentry mural is an indication that the local loyalist community is supportive enough to maintain its existence. It is also a gauge of loyalist strength beyond the immediate borders of Sandy Row,

[11] Mural that marks the entrance to a sectarian area (Rolston 2012)

Figure 16: UDA memorial mural with the paramilitary emblems - Sandy Row, Belfast

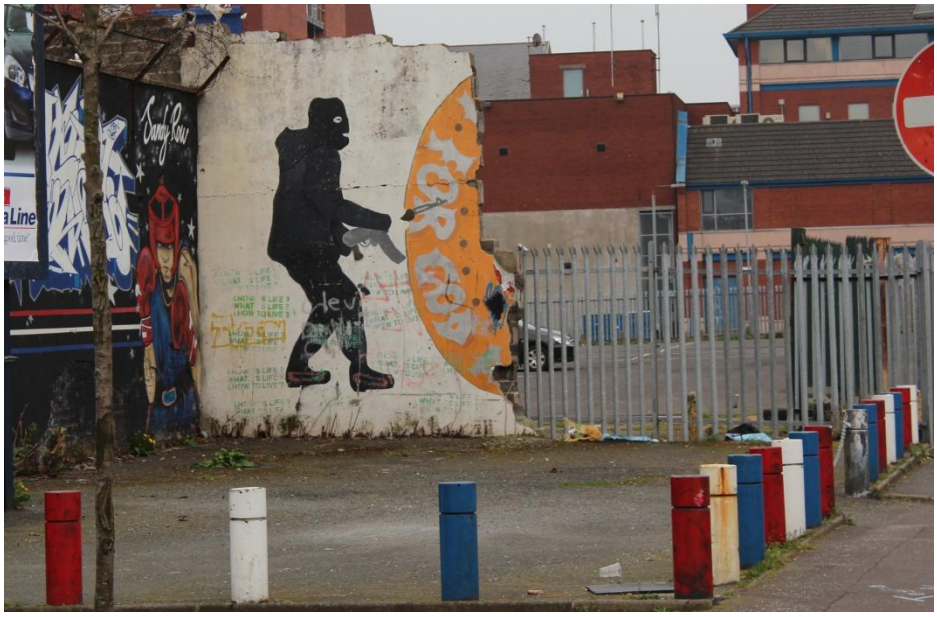

Figure 17: Defunct paramilitary mural (surrounded by Union Jack colors) on Sandy Row, Belfast

considering most murals that exist at interfaces are indicative of internal sectarian contestation over territory (Davies 2001: 158). Farther down the road, the dilapidated mural represents the concessions that loyalists have made in terms of altering their image. It is likely that that mural happened to be collateral damage in an attempt at some neighborhood redesign, but either the violent image or the accompanying message was deemed expendable by the immediate community. The new, local pride murals featuring the

footballers and the map of Northern Ireland are symbols of attempts by the loyalists to improve public support. On Sandy Row, the high degree of visibility of the sentry mural might be the driving force behind creation of the local pride murals. In other words, the UDA produces local pride murals there in an attempt to temper their aggressive displays with images that signify their willingness to compromise with greater public (and political) demands for peacefulness.

Memorial murals are a highly politicized subset of 'local' murals. I would like to avoid attaching 'pride' to them, as I did in describing the last category of mural themes, because pride is not necessarily the goal of memorialization in this form. Generally, memorial murals are a ceremonial display, a way to bond the immediate community around the death of one of their own, whether it occurred in battle or as an innocent (Santino 2004: 363). The close-knit nature of these segregated neighborhoods is likely a driving force for the proliferation of memorial murals, especially in republican areas (Rolston 2012). A fallen paramilitary member or civilian is not just a symbol, but someone's husband, wife, son, daughter, fellow church member, classmate, colleague etc. Some memorial murals depict groups of local people rather than individuals; on New Lodge Road, there is a very recently painted mural (Figure 18) memorializing the victims of the "New Lodge Six Massacre" which took place in 1973. The six victims are painted in portrait around the edge of the main image of several civilians holding a bleeding young boy. This is a striking memorial, as the central image is painted in a circular frame bisected by the crosshairs of a gun, representing a sniper's view of the people murdered. The intimidation invoked in this mural is as arresting as the loyalist paramilitary murals with gun barrels pointed straight out at the viewer. In the case of this New Lodge Road mural, the viewer is made to fear what they cannot see – the concealed sniper whose sight is trained on them. This mural also directly names the British army as the murderers of the six young men, which adds an additionally pointed political component to the message. Such a claim would not be well-received or even allowed to continue existing if the immediate public and local leadership did not find it acceptable.

As of today, memorial murals are one of two kinds of murals that the republican paramilitaries (in their de-militarized form) see as appropriate venues for the inclusion of masked, hooded gunmen. The other acceptable place for these intimidating characters is in historical murals, where they are rationalized as important components for a realistic rendition of the look and feel of the past (Rolston 2012). It would

Figure 18: "New Lodge Six" memorial mural - New Lodge Road, Belfast

be pointless to uncover the faces now of those who were camouflaged at the time; their missions then had required anonymity and, for some, revelation of their identity now could cause personal or familial problems for those being memorialized. Some opposition groups have claimed that the IRA and the other republican paramilitaries have not been as vigilant in removal of intimidating imagery as they claim; Dominic Bryan[12] made this clear by saying, "the guns have been removed, but not the masks" (Bryan 2012).

[12] Director and lecturer at the Institute for Irish Studies in Queen's University, Belfast; social anthropologist and author of *Transforming Conflict: Flags and Emblems*

A memorial mural, at its very core, is quasi-reactionary. While commemoration is clearly a component of these wall paintings, a large influence on their creation is response to an event. In this case, the event in question is someone's death, which cannot be reversed in any meaningful way. Paramilitary members might wish to respond in a tit-for-tat manner by targeting those responsible, but muralists simply react. The murals that result become parts of the huge conflict narrative; how else could we actually visualize a violent struggle taking place without some actual indication that people are being harmed or killed? Individual examples of violence painted onto walls stand in for the larger overall trends of violence perpetrated against either side (Bell 2011: 133). Painting murals is one of the few peaceful ways to react to a situation that the victim side had no control over. Although not representative of recent events, the mural of Annette McGavigan in Derry's Bogside exemplifies this phenomenon perfectly. Annette was a 14-year-old girl returning home (to the Bogside) from school when she was shot and killed by a member of the British army. Her likeness now covers the height of a two-story gable wall, simultaneously commemorating her death and using her innocence to illustrate the senselessness of the murders committed against nationalists.

Additionally, memorial murals serve to remind the republican community of what they have survived and what should motivate them to persevere. These murals are agents for rallying the kind of community support that is vital to mural production in the first place. Especially in the case of republican murals, where political and social support is visibly quite strong (based on the breadth of mural content in existence and the public reception to their creation), memorial murals can occupy the position of continuous motivator. Since last year marked the 30th anniversary of the hunger strike, muralists created several new wall paintings to commemorate the event. The utility of the older message behind the hunger strike murals – political status for prisoners – is no longer relevant, so the motivation for painting these new murals must have come from a desire to remember and re-motivate. Interestingly, these murals provided a spark for a worryingly violent summer. To some loyalists, the new murals of the hunger strikers were reminiscent of a volatile time in political history. They claimed a double-standard was at

work in the republicans' favor, allowing them to paint semi-violent imagery while loyalists were criticized for doing the same. This problem ended with UVF loyalists in east Belfast invading the neighboring suburb known as the Short Strand, a predominately Catholic neighborhood, and inciting several days of rioting (Rolston 2012). Authorities were concerned that this marked the end of the relative peace that Belfast had been experiencing, especially following the creation of two brand new loyalist murals on Newtownards Road (Figure 19). In a way, these paintings could be classed as 'memorial,' based on their intention to remind the loyalist and republican communities that the outwardly dormant UVF could still be called to arms, but the public consensus I heard criticized these murals as little more than 'muscle-flexing' on the part of the UVF battalion general.

Figure 19: One of the 2011 loyalist Newtownards Roads murals

Source: http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/jun/24/belfast-no-one-willing-forget-past

This very recent display could be characterized as a powerful indicator that this UVF group was, to quote an older loyalist mural, "prepared for peace, ready for war" (Rolston 2003: 40). These murals are definitely in violation of the ceasefire agreements and the Terrorism Act, overtly so, but their aggressiveness speaks to some level of group insecurity (Bryan and Gillespie 2005: 5). During one of my many taxi rides around Belfast, I spoke to a driver whose feelings summarized the loyalists' current status problem, case in point. When I asked about those two murals on Newtownards Road, he quickly

responded by self-identifying as a loyalist (ideological preface was commonplace when I asked people these kinds of questions) and then continued by saying that the murals were the product of "a hopped-up cokehead who wants to put on a show." In so few words, he touched on several reasons for the insufficiency of loyalist social and political support. First and foremost, this young man's attitude towards a paramilitary leader for his side is pretty remarkable. If he had a good opinion to share about the battalion general, he did not find it important to share with me in his brief description of the situation. Details aside, the cab driver's feelings gave plenty of insight into the crumbling internal support of some loyalist groups today. Secondly, he included reference to cocaine, a connection I had not heard much about until arriving in Northern Ireland. Paramilitary groups fight over territory now for purposes of gaining public support and for drug trafficking, causing infighting within their larger movements (Loftus 2012, Bryan 2012). On the loyalist side, this detracts from what power they could have as a unified group. Finally, my taxi driver reiterated what I had been told by several others about the appearance of murals on Newtownards Road: these murals were created out of insecurity and a desire to 'make a show' out of being powerful. Is it surprising that a movement with members this unsupportive would want to compensate with intimidating displays of militant power?

Modern-day republican murals frequently include mainstream Sinn Féin messages. Since the republican movement developed a political arm for the express purpose of furthering its agenda, creating wall paintings that promulgate republican ideals seems entirely appropriate. Sinn Féin's popularity represents the success of the republican movement. Considering its overall majority status in the Republic of Ireland and position as the dominant nationalist party in Belfast, the murals provide a convenient platform for boasting through self-advertisement (Bryan 2012). Additionally, painting messages with a political slant rather than a paramilitary one is more culturally diplomatic and less provocative in the divided setting of Northern Ireland. Propagandizing for Sinn Féin puts the entire nationalist community on a leveled playing field; the murals can reinforce political principles that many already share and teach rhetoric for new issues. This is another self-fulfilling aspect of mural painting, like preserving the murals

for tourist consumption; by painting things that the muralists believe the community will support by virtue of shared ideals, they foster an environment where future murals will have public support.

Murals depicting Sinn Féin messages obviously have a large degree of political backing. They are a highly visible, very large propaganda poster in some cases, campaigning for candidates in sympathetic territory. As a theme, electoral issues were not always acceptable in republican murals. In fact, before the early 1990s, republican murals had actively discouraged participation in elections. It was only during the period when power-sharing became a popular idea that "fighting back with the ballot" became highly, highly supported (Rolston 2003: 11). Republicans wanted to take advantage of their novel ability to restructure society through political means. Unlike loyalists, republicans could advance directly from a paramilitary or activist role into their established political party (Jarman 2012). This direct access to political power made producing murals of candidates and specific issues a highly effective means of grassroots campaigning. To an extent, this is a prime example of murals being used as an ideological teaching mechanism; changing public behavior from abstention to active participation in voting would likely not have happened unaided and without widespread visibility.

The current status of the republican movement is visible through their choices of mural content. It is generally agreed upon by many, and supported through census data, that Catholics will soon outnumber Protestants in Northern Ireland (Sluka 2009: 293). This fact, compounded with internal and external issues among loyalists, comprises the evidence base for why many (myself included) believe Ireland will be a re-united nation in the near future. This belief gives republican muralists a self-actualized kind of creative license from which to work that is reinforced by public support. Republicans have everything to gain from the reunification of the country, while the loyalists have everything to lose, so republican muralists are surrounded by an atmosphere of "waiting out" the downfall of unionism and returning to an Ireland entirely controlled by the Irish (Rolston 2000: 165). This ethos is reflected in muralists' choices for content; since paintings do not necessarily have to fill the role of activists, campaign managers, public relations representatives or outreach workers, they can effectively portray anything they want! The

painters are limited only by desire to avoid damaging the republican community through misrepresentation or association with images and ideas that could be interpreted poorly.

Obviously, muralists are sufficiently motivated by their ideological background to the extent that they volunteer time, effort and resources for large-scale public works. They know that involvement does not necessarily dictate success – vandalism from opposition groups and destruction by police is always a possibility – and yet they continue to paint. From an individual perspective, motivation is omnipresent, as evidenced by the thirty-plus years of mural production by republicans to date. From the community perspective, support is readily available. As I mentioned early on, republican muralists have the advantage of being indoctrinated into a well-realized movement and knowing what messages will resonate; most every mural can find an audience to appreciate it (Rolston 2003: 9). Direct political influence on mural creation, however, is noticeably lacking in republican wall paintings. While generally supported by the political structure at hand, like Sinn Féin, republican muralists are far less frequently commissioned than loyalists or unionists (Rolston 2012). Republicans do commission some murals, but the painters generally act independently of paramilitary leadership (Rolston 2004: 43). In the distant past, unionist politicians were present to do official unveilings of new murals, especially during the marching season in the summer. Public addresses were given and the events even had formal invitations on occasion (Loftus 1983: 11). In the more recent past, loyalist paramilitary leadership has frequently been the issuer of mural requests. The appearance of the Newtownards Road murals was not a random event: during this particular outbreak of violence, the UVF leader of east Belfast was widely blamed for their creation. Although circumstantial, fewer commissioned republican murals seem to indicate that the movement has sufficient support at all levels of participation.

The fact that the majority of republican murals are seen as less overtly threatening than loyalist murals also speaks to the republican strategy of "waiting it out" (Bryan and Gillespie 2005: 11). Overall republican cohesion is responsible for the minimal amount of splintering and infighting within the movement. There is definitely not an absence of republican sub-factions, visible through the 32-County

Sovereignty Movement and the different incarnations of the IRA: the PIRA, CIRA and RIRA[13]. These groups represent ideological splits to be sure, but they are not as fundamentally different as the loyalist divergence from unionism, or even the loyalist sub-groups (Shirlow 2001: 746, Rolston 2003: 10). The fragmentation that has occurred on the loyalist side, resulting in a laundry-list of paramilitary acronyms, is detrimental to their efforts at removing violent imagery from the walls. Where republicans have less to fight each other about and can focus their energy solely on opposition to loyalist and unionist activities, loyalists have to split their creative power between defense from each other *and* Irish nationalists. Working from this position of being constantly on the defensive and trying to pre-empt attacks from all sides, loyalists end up continuing to paint intimidating murals. While the historical differences in power associated with the two sides might put the republican painters in a more positive light, there has been a lot of contention over whether or not the "guns" are truly gone from the murals (Bryan 2012). The slow demilitarization process following the IRA ceasefire translated to the removal of many balaclavas in the murals, but not a disappearance of paramilitary-affiliated murals entirely. New memorial murals and historical murals often include masks and guns for the purposes of recreating a realistic image, but whether or not these displays of militant accessories are entirely innocent is unknowable.

Finally, republicans have one other single advantage over the loyalist and unionist community that gives them confidence in their mural creation. The Good Friday Agreement, signed in 1998, reiterates the process outlined in the Anglo-Irish Agreement, that reunification of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland can occur with a majority vote in both countries (Shirlow 2001: 744). While the treaty was created as a collaborative effort between the Irish and British governments (much to overall unionist discontent), it continues the pattern of giving the "the South a say in the affairs of the North" (Rolston 1991: 43). Compounding this potential for change with the projected demographic changes I mentioned earlier, the republicans are understandably at ease. Reunification can happen if they desire it; it is only a matter of time.

[13] Provisional IRA, Conditional IRA, Real IRA

Loyalist Murals

Although I have already described some of the ways loyalist murals differ from republican murals, probing further into the prevalent themes of loyalist murals is vital to understanding how they are used in Northern Irish society. Loyalist murals, since their entrance into the visual landscape of the north, have been thematically focused on feelings associated with threat and besiegement (Moore and Sanders 2002: 12). Even the intentionally intimidating paramilitary murals for which loyalist painters have a great fondness can be interpreted as artifacts of an uncertain, defensive environment. Much speculation has been made about why this is the case, with a few prevailing reasons: 'abandonment' by Britain and unpreparedness for political change towards peace, especially in response to ceasefires and power-sharing.

Loyalism, as an ideology, is the product of repeated infringement on unionist influence in the north of Ireland. During the introduction, I outlined the downfall of total unionist authority in Northern Ireland following British intervention into the affairs of the state. These recurring sleights against unionist leadership lead to a schism between government-loyal and monarchy-loyal ideological entities, resulting in the loyalist view where "the Englishman is as much 'the other' as the Irish nationalist" (Moore and Sanders 2002: 12). What is intriguing about the loyalist movement overall is its desire to remain attached to something; being set adrift, un-affiliated with any other nation, would be too great of a challenge considering the size of the country. So, this group has developed a British-Ulster identity that is based in deference to the British royal family and their undemocratic, unadulterated "British-ness" combined with patriotism to an autonomous state (Morag 2008: 277). In light of this, it seems like loyalists should express annoyance with the British for setting political goals that are fundamentally inappropriate to the aims of unionism instead of feeling abandoned, but the completely dissociated position of abandonment is much easier to communicate in public than a nuanced, fractured relationship with a colonial country. This zero-sum logic creates an identity separate from unionism; aside from their radical willingness to perpetrate an armed struggle, little would differentiate loyalism from unionism if

both shared the same stance on British willingness to cooperate with Irish nationalists. The extent to which a Northern Irish loyalist will confide in feeling abandoned by the British, however, instead of righteously declaring independence *from* the British government, is difficult to estimate. Great Britain has expended a great deal of resources on mediating a highly politicized sectarian conflict for more than forty years between two nations who, by western, industrialized standards, are an anomaly for their involvement in this variety of guerrilla warfare. For economic and ideological reasons alone, it is understandable why Britain might want to leave Northern Ireland to fend for itself.

Loyalist paramilitaries have cause to feel inadequate in terms of military power. Unlike the IRA, which has a high degree of community status and political clout in terms of its association with Sinn Féin, the loyalist paramilitaries have always existed on the smaller-scale. Republicans feel as though the IRA is the mirror, a worthy adversary, to the British army, while the broadest that loyalist paramilitary influence can reach is defense against Irish nationalist power in Northern Ireland (Bryan 2012). I believe that the disparity in social and political support between the republican and loyalist paramilitaries is a probable cause for why individual memorial murals (Figure 20) have a great deal of community support in loyalist areas (Rolston 2003: 5). Such large paintings as tribute to members of the loyalist paramilitaries magnifies the importance of their contribution as felt by other loyalist and unionist supporters – though arguably mostly those in leadership – and works to counteract the disproportionate socio-political status enjoyed by the republican paramilitaries relative to the loyalists.

Siege mentality is a very well-documented phenomenon among loyalists as an ideological ethos. Starting with the siege of Derry in 1689, the loyalists have diversified their fear of intrusion from many different invaders. In the case of Derry, the intrusion was extremely literal, and images of 'closing the gates of Derry' have adorned walls since the beginning of the unionist mural tradition in the early 20th century (Moore and Sanders 2002: 11). Since then, other stories have been added to a list of loyalist wariness. Aside from the obvious uncertainty over being separated by a single, currently soft border from a population who desires the reunification of Ireland, and by proxy, the destruction of Northern Ireland,

many other renditions of loyalist siege mentality have been painted by muralists. Cú Chulainn was chosen by the UDA as a 'defender of Ulster' due to a legend where he protected the province from Celtic queen Maebh and her invading warriors (Hartnett 2003: 145). The proximity of Northern Ireland to the Republic

Figure 20: UFF memorial mural in Hopewell Crescent, Belfast

is the cause for much of the loyalist alarm. In reality, Northern Ireland is a very small country that is bounded by a proportionally much larger country (Loftus 2012). The majority religion and ethnic self-identification of those who live in the Republic of Ireland is different from those in the north, which is an additional source of distress.

The republicans have a long cultural history and mythology from which to draw mural content. Loyalists, on the other hand, are in a unique position of being effectively 'history-less' due to how their ancestors came to live in Northern Ireland. If we excuse the UDA's support of the Cruthin hypothesis,

more recent history shows the arrival of English settlers into Ireland at the tail end of the 17th century, following the famous conquest of William of Orange. Soon thereafter, the Plantation era established a strong foothold of English influence, buffeted by economic gain, which is visible on the island today (Buckley and Kenney 1995: 45). Due to their dissociation with the British government, loyalists have had to effectively create their own history, borrowing or inventing 'tradition' from ethnically similar groups, such as the Irish. For instance, amid the dynamic landscape of loyalist paramilitarism, a new group has surfaced that conspicuously predates all other paramilitary organizations, both loyalist and republican. Although little evidenced of this group has surfaced before, the Ulster Defense Union (Figure 21) is currently on display in a mural in the Hopewell Crescent estate. In this mural, the 'timeline' of UDU

Figure 21: UFF history mural, UDU and UDA as older groups - Hopewell Crescent, Belfast

to UDA and UFF gives a sense of continuity to loyalist paramilitary activity. Branded with historical trappings, like a heraldic emblem and a Latin motto, the UDU is trying to expedite its establishment of

existence (Jarman 2012). The central gunman in this mural, anonymous beneath a balaclava with a weapon trained on the viewer, is symbolically daring us to question the legitimacy of his (likely) fabricated history while simultaneously ignoring the obvious fractiousness of the lineage he associates with.

Disassociation with Britain has also required loyalists to carefully cultivate a unique identity. The overwhelming presence of paramilitary murals created by loyalists is indicative of how they want to be viewed by the public. Identities are communicated within the context of an interaction, so, prolific creation of paramilitary murals is a way to stack the proverbial odds in favor of the public's exposure to the 'loyalist as paramilitary' identity (Buckley and Kenney 1995: 211). Among paramilitary murals, this seems to occupy a different role than the republican usage as self-advertisement. Only the UVF has been in existence a comparable amount of time to the IRA, so a large portion of loyalism actually required identity creation. Republicans use paramilitary murals not to create preliminary associations between republicanism and paramilitary strength, since such connections have long been established, but instead to maintain their visibility within the republican community (Davies 2001: 157). Paramilitary murals thus serve different functions based on which side is using them, and they are an excellent example of the disparate intentions behind ostensibly parallel wall paintings. Especially considering the central role of the paramilitaries in the continuing conflict in Northern Ireland, these subtle differences in the authorial intent of mural creation are evidence that opposition group murals are not mirror images of each other (McCormick and Jarman 2005: 50, Buckley and Kenney 1995: 195).

Loyalist murals today are suffering an identity crisis. With the disestablishment of the IRA, the chief reason for loyalist existence is gone. Muralists must either tone down the paramilitary (loyalist) identity professed in their wall paintings and return to an acceptable state of unionist imagery or stop painting altogether. Loyalists have been criticized heavily for their inability to make these fairly drastic changes to their murals (Rolston 2004: 40). Re-imaging campaigns in some neighborhoods have been extremely effective despite other parts of Belfast continuing to prominently display armed gunmen on the

walls. To the credit of the loyalist communities, there are several documented occasions where murals have gone up, the public has complained, and the muralists have redesigned their painting to be more in line with what the immediate neighbors find acceptable. This has especially been the case on roads where murals have been painted very near to schools and churches (Bryan 2012).

Loyalist involvement in mural painting is inextricably linked to the original unionist tradition of painting murals alongside their other parade decorations. Unionists carved out the niche in the public landscape that could be occupied by murals and set precedents for how they should look, where they should be located, etc. In the 1980s, however, the tradition became a staunchly loyalist activity, transitioning neatly from unionist to loyalist imagery and thinking after 1986 (Rolston 2012). In a similar manner to vanishing Catholic imagery in republican murals, the sharp decline of unionist imagery following the Anglo-Irish Agreement speaks to several different possibilities of social and political change on the non-republican side (Rolston 1991: 40). Unionism is the majority ideology in Northern Ireland, so it is entirely possible that 'advertisement' for unionism in mural form is no longer a priority. It is also possible, using the same frame of logic for the disappearance of Catholic republican mural content, that the loyalists desire a greater support base and/or believe that unionist policies have been unsuccessful in dealing with the current status of the conflict in Northern Ireland. It is worth mentioning that amid this broad ideological shift from unionist to loyalist mural creation, the symbol of King Billy has not fully disappeared. Although readable as a directly linear historical connection, the transition in mural creators did not guarantee the inheritance of symbols or messages from unionist painters to loyalists. King Billy's continued use in loyalist murals is understandable because he symbolizes one point in history where England's claim to Ireland was indisputable. The ship Mountjoy and the Apprentice Boys in Derry are also still used today, due to their relevance in winning Ireland for England several centuries ago (Loftus 1983: 11). Aside from those specific symbols, can we expect loyalists to be able to 'dial down' their favored mural themes today to a relatively non-violent level that they never participated in in the first place? The implausibility of this request has made clear the level to which loyalists are a uni-dimensional

group. At the risk of repeating myself, without the IRA and other republican paramilitaries to defend against, the loyalist paramilitaries effectively have no cause to exist. The insecurity associated with this fact is so strong that loyalists have been unable to overtly demilitarize their organizations and stop painting murals that feature paramilitance. In this way, they are limited by the bounds of what else they can identify with (otherwise they would paint it) and how they can continue to make a case for their existence in Northern Ireland.

Conclusion

As a state, Northern Ireland has been hovering on the border of "not-peace-not-war" for nearly ten years now (Sluka 2009: 282). In an analogous manner, the murals of the country have also been in flux, attempting to reconcile a place for themselves in a country where paramilitary activity is no longer the order of the day. Some believe that violence is again visible, blurry on the horizon, especially with a majority growing in the country that will be capable of reuniting the island of Ireland. How these developments will affect mural trends in the future is uncertain; analysis of murals in existence today depicts a very different power structure than what existed 40 years ago. Today, we see two remarkably similar-looking groups using a similar art form in similar areas of public space to achieve similar goals, namely, to propagandize for themselves. A closer inspection reveals two groups that are using the same media for different purposes under different pressures. Republicans, while still a minority in the country, paint a host of different themes in murals for their community. They are trusted by members of their neighborhood to create murals that will resonate with others who share their ideals. Republican painters have little need to continue creating paramilitary murals due to the breadth of other mural themes available to them; from international sectarian conflict murals to historical murals, mythological murals to local pride and memorial murals. The muralists are supported in their efforts by the community and the broader nationalist movement, all the way up to their leadership in political office.

Loyalist murals have a difficult time rationalizing their self-advocacy in the present day. To begin with, loyalism represented only a fringe part of the broader unionist movement. Its ideals, though rooted in a painstakingly specific allegiance to the British monarchy, are quickly losing their footing in an environment of peace initiatives, power-sharing and external mediation. The insecurity of the movement that has resulted from these changing conditions is visible in the murals done by loyalist painters. Continued portrayal of paramilitary content creates a defensive display, one of a movement that is unsure about its future although willing to fight for its protection. Muralists are limited in the scope of images they can paint due to internal instability of the movement and social pressure to curtail the hostility of their wall paintings. How loyalists will adapt remains a mystery, but hopefully the conclusion after more than forty years of violence will be relatively peaceful.

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